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SOVIET BATTALION IN THE DEFENSE

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SOVIET BATTALION IN THE DEFENSE

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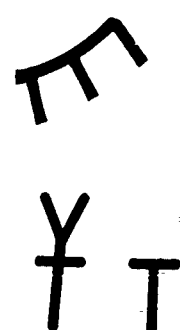
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Soviet Battalion in the Defense

Major James F. Gebhardt, US Army

The shift to a more defensive posture is well under way at the tactical level in the Soviet army. The author provides a detailed description of how a Soviet motorized infantry battalion with tank and combat support attachments would conduct a prepared defense. He makes it evident that an attack against a Soviet battalion that has had time to prepare will be a costly operation.




FOR MANY years, the US Army at the tactical level has focused on the offensive capability of the Soviet army and defense against attacks by numerically superior forces. With the advent of AirLand Battle doctrine, however, we have become more confident of our ability to defend and even to go over to the offensive. The Soviets, on the other hand, have always proclaimed the defensive nature of their military doctrine and, over the past few years, have more forcefully reasserted this claim in their military press.¹ Recently published articles and books that describe tactical-level principles of defensive combat thus provide a guide for US Army units regarding the nature of contemporary Soviet tactical defenses.

By the Soviet definition, defense is a type of combat that has three basic purposes: to defeat a superior enemy; to cover or support a particular axis, area or objective; and to economize forces on a secondary axis to permit the creation of superior forces on a main axis. Defense can be employed at the strategic, operational or

tactical level, and it can be planned by the Soviet commander or forced on him by a more powerful enemy. The contemporary Soviet defense seeks to defeat the enemy during his movement to and occupation of assembly and attack positions, during his attack on the forward edge of the defense and during his attempts to penetrate the defensive position. The Soviets plan to defeat their enemy by several means, including massive strikes by various types of weapons, conducting a counter-preparation, stubbornly holding key defensive positions and areas and decisively counterattacking to defeat enemy penetrations. In all of this, the Soviet force must inflict significant losses on the enemy and thus create favorable conditions for the transition to the offensive.²

Although a Soviet battalion normally defends as part of a regiment, in some special conditions it will defend as an independent force. For example, it can defeat a counter-attack by a superior force, hold captured lines or positions, support the flanks of a larger attack-



ing force or act as rear guard for a larger force that is withdrawing from an unsuccessful meeting engagement.³ A Soviet battalion would prefer not to go over to the defense while in contact with the enemy, because this would often be in a position or on terrain not of the Soviet commander's choosing, and under enemy direct fire. The Soviet commander would much rather assume the defense when not in contact, enabling a security zone to be established in front of his position and permitting time to plan, organize and construct good platoon and company positions.

Characteristics of the Battalion Defensive Area

A Soviet battalion defends an area (*rayon oborony batal'ona*), a sector defined by left and right boundaries, by a forward edge and by the positions of service and support units in the rear. In front of this sector, an area approximately 5 kilometers wide and 3 kilometers deep, the battalion deploys combat outposts.⁴ Within this area, it constructs primary and alternate company strongpoints, a battalion reserve position, and main and secondary fixed and mobile positions for artillery, mortars, tanks and other fire support assets, each with designated lines and sectors of fire. It also constructs air defense firing positions, a battalion command post, a logistic support area, barriers and obstacles, deployment lines for the second echelon's counterattack and paths or routes to and between positions for maneuver, resupply and evacuation.⁵

A defending battalion also constructs false (deceptive) positions, both within and outside the defensive area. Normally, each battalion will construct at least one false company position; and each company, at least one false platoon position.

A combat outpost, normally consisting of a reinforced platoon positioned forward of the battalion, provides security for the battalion. It prevents enemy reconnaissance from reaching the main position and provides defending com-

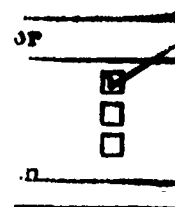
panies early warning of a surprise attack. The battalion headquarters is responsible for fire support of this platoon. The defensive area's forward edge is characterized by terrain that permits good observation and fires, especially long-

The Soviets plan to defeat their enemy by several means, including massive strikes by various types of weapons, conducting a counter-preparation, stubbornly holding key defensive positions and areas and decisively counterattacking to defeat enemy penetrations. In all of this, the Soviet force must inflict significant losses on the enemy and thus create favorable conditions for the transition to the offensive.

range antitank fires. The first trenchline is sited to take advantage of natural antitank obstacles and to facilitate barrier construction.

Within the defensive area, the battalion is normally arrayed in two echelons, dispersed in such a manner that a single enemy tactical nuclear weapon cannot destroy more than a company.⁶ For the same reason, within the first echelon companies, platoon positions may be several hundred meters apart. The mission of the first echelon is to inflict maximum casualties and materiel losses on the attacking force, hold important positions or objectives, delay the movement of the enemy and create favorable conditions for his defeat by nuclear and conventional fires and by counterattacks of the second echelon.⁷

The mission of second-echelon companies is to conduct a counterattack or, when that is not feasible, defeat the attacking enemy by fire from an occupied strongpoint position or line. If the enemy has used nuclear weapons to breach first-echelon positions, the second echelon may fill these breaches or replace first-echelon units. The second echelon also may have the mission



to destroy or hinder enemy airborne or air assault troops inserted behind the first-echelon positions.⁸

The combat formation (*boevoy poryadok*) of the battalion may be changing. In the recent past, the standard configuration appeared to be two echelons, with two companies up and one back.⁹ The 1987 version of *Taktika* (Tactics), however, states that in general the quantity of forces, particularly armor, designated for the

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second echelon is now greater than before. As a consequence, the second echelon now can be equal to or even greater in strength than the first echelon.¹⁰ Whether this change will occur as low as battalion level remains to be seen, but deserves attention. If the battalion forms a reserve, it is usually platoon size and located in a strongpoint to the rear of the battalion defensive area, where it can be used for suddenly arising missions.

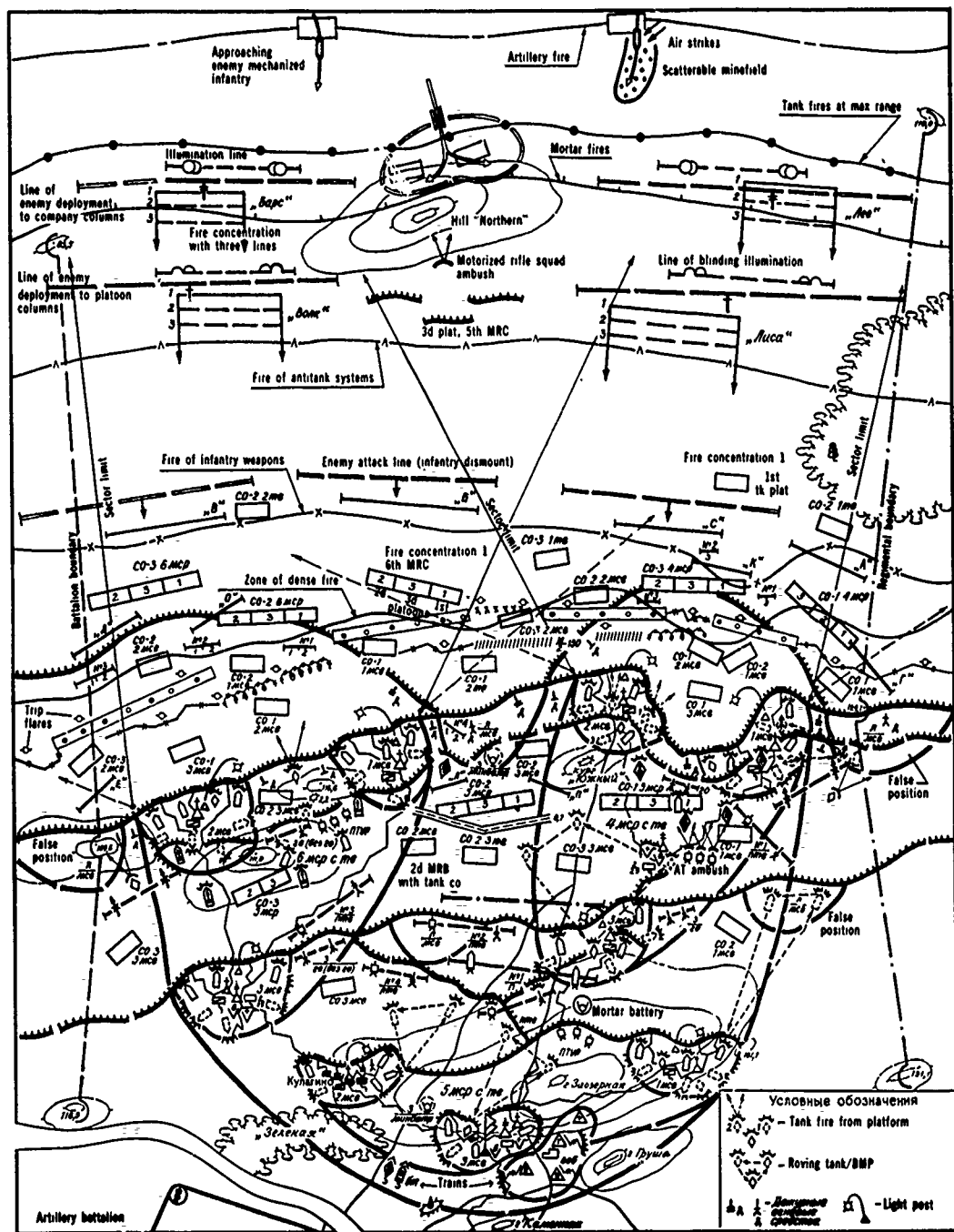
Attached tank or motorized rifle companies are normally split into platoons and attached to defending companies, while the mortar battery and the AGS-17 (automatic grenade launcher) platoon remain immediately subordinated to the battalion commander.¹¹ The antitank platoon normally deploys intact under the control of the battalion commander on the most likely armor avenue of approach or in a position to assist the commitment of the second echelon. In addition, the battalion commander also normally retains control of the air defense platoon.

System of Fire

One of the most crucial elements of a Soviet battalion defensive area is its system of fire. Simply stated, the system of fire is the combination of planned fires of all assigned and attached weapons systems organized for the defeat of the enemy. Elements of the system of fire include regions, sectors and lines of massed, concentrated and barrier fire; zones of dense multi-layered fires of all weapons on the approaches to the defense, in front of the forward edge, on the flanks and in the depth; and maneuver by fire.¹² The system of fire is integrated into the commander's battle plan and takes into consideration the natural and planned engineer obstacles.

An April 1988 article in the Soviet tactical journal, *Military Herald*, described the construction of a battalion defensive position and included a detailed textual and graphic description of a system of fire (see figure).¹³ The defending motorized rifle battalion was reinforced by the normal artillery battalion, tank company, air defense battery and engineer platoon. The battalion commander attached a tank platoon to each rifle company and placed antiaircraft platoons with each of the two first-echelon companies to afford them a degree of tactical self-sufficiency. Additionally, a platoon from each motorized rifle company was designated to fire against air targets.

Each company prepared a system of fire to defeat enemy tanks by constructing primary and alternate tank firing positions in each platoon strongpoint, with fire concentrations for each tank platoon. The 4th and 5th motorized rifle companies also employed roving tanks. Designated BMPs (armored personnel carriers) served as maneuverable antitank weapons, together with battalion antitank assets and attack helicopters. While the maneuverability of these weapons systems provided a basis for their survivability, at the same time it served to confuse the enemy as to their precise location. Both first-echelon companies also planned antitank ambushes at their forward security positions, on



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their flanks and within their company strongpoints.

Motorized rifle company weapons were organized to deliver interlocking and flanking fires, with designated sectors of concentrated fire for specific platoons and companies. Light and heavy on-call or "duty" (*dezhurnyy*) machineguns were placed in false platoon positions

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on the flanks of the real positions, along with a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launcher in the case of the position on the right flank of the battalion. The AGS-17 platoons deployed in the company strongpoints split between the forward edge and the depth of the positions. Some armored personnel carriers occupied positions on reverse slopes, with their machineguns laid to deliver interlocking fire on the approaches to the forward edge.

The attached artillery battalion and the motorized rifle battalion's own mortar battery provided indirect fire support.¹⁴ The artillery battalion deployed some distance to the rear of the motorized rifle battalion, as indicated by the break in the sketch. The artillery battalion commander, however, collocated with the motorized rifle battalion commander at the latter's command post. The mortar battery's primary position was just to the rear of the 4th Motorized Rifle Company, with two three-gun alternate positions, one in the false position along the forward edge between 4th and 6th motorized rifle companies, and the other in the 5th Motorized Rifle Company strongpoint.

The artillery battalion commander planned

indirect fires on likely enemy avenues of approach and deployment lines, on sectors between company strongpoints and on the flanks and in the depths of the company and battalion positions. The artillery fire plan included an illumination plan for night combat actions. The defending battalion also planned to employ combat helicopters in its system of fire, with primary firing positions on the battalion's flanks.

Engineer Preparations

A second important element of a Soviet battalion's defensive position is its engineer preparation.¹⁵ Engineer work facilitates the actions of the defender and at the same time hinders the actions of the attacker. The first engineer priority for a defending Soviet battalion while not in contact with the enemy is to prepare firing positions for individual and crew-served weapons, tanks, BMPs, antitank weapons and other weapons systems. Engineers clear fields of observation and fire, construct command observation posts and medical points, erect obstacles and barriers in front of and between strongpoints, prepare movement routes to deployment lines for counterattacks and firing lines and establish water supply points.

The second engineer priority is to develop fighting positions for rifle squads, tanks, BMPs and other weapons systems in secondary or temporary firing positions; complete the construction of command posts and medical points; construct covered dugouts for each squad or crew; erect cover for weapons, equipment, ammunition and other materiel; and create additional obstacles in front of and between strongpoints. The final step in the engineer preparation is to conceal everything (*maskirovka*). While local materials are used whenever available, the Soviets employ a broad inventory of devices to deceive the enemy's human and technical reconnaissance efforts.

The battalion defensive position described in the April article (depicted in the figure) was constructed by the 2d Taman Guards Mo-

torized Rifle Division as a showpiece for visiting officers.¹⁶ The authors made special note of the fact that the unit used local materials rather than the prefabricated bunkers and other defensive fixtures available in the Soviet inventory. The first and second trenchlines were continuous, and the third was almost continuous. The unit cut trails for tanks and armored personnel carriers to move within the position to threatened sectors. These trails were made to resemble antitank ditches when viewed from the enemy side.

For increased survivability, each rifle squad had revetted shelters, platoon and company commanders had command post shelters, and even the battalion support elements were dug in. According to the authors, a motorized rifle battalion that skillfully exploits the defensive characteristics of average terrain has a survivability rate of 40 percent. By dedicating four-fifths of the manpower of the battalion to engineer tasks (while the other one-fifth stands guard), with 4 to 6 hours of work the survivability rate can be increased to 62 percent. After two to three days of preparation, 85 percent of the battalion can be fully protected in covered shelters, and armored vehicles can protect remaining personnel. The Soviets calculate that this level of engineer preparation will enable 80 percent of their defending force to survive three nuclear strikes of one kiloton each.¹⁷

The illustrative defensive position included five false (deceptive) platoon-size positions, three along the forward edge and two in the depth of the battalion position. The large number of trenches, paths, firing positions, false positions and shelters in the battalion position serve multiple purposes. They harden the defense and make it more dynamic. Their sheer quantity serves to confuse the enemy as to which are actual and which are false, and they enable the defender to achieve surprise by the speed with which he can maneuver within his own position to the threatened sector.

The other major aspect of engineer support to the defense was the construction of counter-



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mobility obstacles in front of and within the battalion position. Especially important in this regard were minefields. As the sketch shows, mixed minefields were constructed across the battalion front. Within the defensive position, a line was designated for the construction of a hasty minefield in front of 5th Motorized Rifle Company positions. Other engineer obstacles included barbed wire entanglements and anti-tank obstacles in front of the battalion position,

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and a .7-kilometer long antitank ditch within the position between the two forward company strongpoints.

These obstacles were closely tied to the system of fire. On one armor avenue of approach, for example, engineers buried hundreds of kilograms of explosives in the soil. At the twist of a firing handle, tons of earth could instantly be churned into an antitank obstacle. The area around this obstacle would then become a killing zone for Soviet antitank fires.

Reconnaissance

While his force is preparing its defensive position, a Soviet battalion commander conducts reconnaissance to determine the enemy situation. He is particularly concerned with the enemy's preparations for attack, main avenues of approach and time of attack. Other reconnaissance tasks include the location of enemy reserves and their direction of movement and the positions of artillery and other weapons systems. The Soviet commander employs a wide range of human and technical reconnaissance systems. If he is not in contact with the enemy force when he begins construction of his defensive position, he deploys a combat reconnaissance patrol. In our example, this patrol was a motorized rifle squad from one of the platoons of the 5th Motorized Rifle Company, which

established an ambush on the southern slopes of hill "Northern." If in contact with the enemy, a Soviet battalion commander employs all available means of observation and, in addition, may detail a small part of his force to engage the enemy (*razvedka boyem*).

Preparation of the Defense

There are several necessary and sequential steps in the preparation of a defense, beginning with the receipt of the order.¹⁸ The commander must organize the battle by gathering information, evaluating the situation, making a decision, establishing tasks for organic and attached units, organizing coordination and systems of fire and planning logistic support and command and control. After his battalion occupies the defensive position and begins construction of strongpoints and engineer obstacles, the commander exercises continuous control to ensure that tasks are performed as ordered.

Continuing a tradition that proved effective during World War II, the Soviet battalion commander walks the terrain with subordinate commanders and passes down his detailed instructions in the form of an oral decision.¹⁹ The battalion commander's decision is more task oriented than mission oriented. For example, for the companies of the first echelon it specifies attachments, strongpoint locations and axis of concentration of main effort, and the order to defeat the attack and destroy enemy forces that penetrate into the position. The commander also specifies the traces of the forward edge and trenchlines; all control measures for fire concentrations in front of and around the company position; how and with what forces to support the flanks and space between positions; and who is responsible for them and who is supporting.²⁰

The battalion commander provides similarly detailed instructions to the second-echelon company; the attached artillery battalion and mortar battery; the grenade launcher platoon; the antitank platoon; those elements that



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remain subordinated to the battalion headquarters; and the unit designated for combat security (the platoon guarding the battalion from a position well forward along the main avenue of approach).

At the same time that he issues his decision for the defense, the battalion commander conducts coordination (*vzaimodeystviye*). This is an additional set of important detailed instructions to specific units of the battalion that all subordinate elements must know. They include such things as target lists for all indirect and direct fire weapons; control measures for fire and/or movement; time schedules for all events; measures for defeat of air assaults and fixed- or rotary-wing attacks; actions upon enemy use of chemical or nuclear weapons; signals for communications and mutual recognition; and so on. Of course, similar coordination must occur with adjacent battalions.

After the battalion commander has issued his decision, subordinate commanders return to their units and accomplish all the tasks that any

unit executes when preparing for battle and, in addition, conduct political indoctrination.

Conduct of the Defense

As soon as the battalion occupies a defensive area, designated tank, BMP and other weapons systems take up positions. The crews of these so-called duty (*dezurnyy*) weapon systems continue to stand watch while the remainder of the unit prepares the position, vehicles or weapons. Preparation of the position continues in this manner until work is complete or the attack begins.

The Soviets expect the attack to be preceded by reconnaissance conducted by a force ranging in size from reinforced company to reinforced battalion. During this prebattle reconnaissance, which may include a limited ground attack, the enemy attempts to discern the organization of the defense. Therefore, if possible, only the "duty" weapons in the false positions engage and defeat the enemy reconnaissance. After repulsing this reconnaissance, Soviet units that have disclosed their positions may relocate to



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alternate positions. If enemy reconnaissance penetrates the defensive position, the Soviet battalion commander takes whatever measures are necessary to destroy the penetration, including the commitment of his second echelon.

When the enemy artillery preparation begins prior to the attack of the Soviet commander's main force, his troops take cover in their dugouts, covered trenches and fighting vehicles. Selected personnel remain at their weapons to prevent the enemy from using the artillery preparation to breach engineer obstacles. If the preparation includes nuclear or chemical ordnance, the Soviet commander uses all his forces to close gaps created in his position, while he and his staff reestablish communications and command and control.

A critical juncture in the battle is the emergence of the Soviet troops from their shel-

ters to reoccupy firing positions. If they come out too early, they will suffer casualties from the enemy's artillery preparation. If they come out too late, they will miss the opportunity to engage the enemy with indirect and then direct fires at maximum ranges. As the attacking force moves toward the defensive position, the Soviet battalion commander concentrates his fires against the most threatened sector, in particular targeting armored vehicles when they enter the obstacle system. If enemy infantrymen are dismounted, an effort is made to strip them away from the armored vehicles.

When enemy soldiers reach a point 30 to 40 meters from the forward positions, motorized rifle troops engage them with grenades and point-blank fire. The battalion makes every effort to defeat the attack in front of the forward edge of the defensive position. If, however, the

enemy penetrates into the defense, the Soviet commander strengthens the flanks of the penetration, stops the forward movement of the penetrating force and then destroys it with a combination of fires and maneuver. If necessary, the Soviet commander uses his second echelon or reserve to launch counterattacks.

After defeating the enemy attack, the Soviet battalion commander reestablishes his position, replenishes his ammunition stocks, rebuilds destroyed fortifications and obstacles, repairs or replaces damaged equipment and evacuates his casualties. If his defense succeeded, but the enemy penetrated to his right or left flank, the battalion prepares for an all-around defense. It might also, on regimental order, attack into the flank or rear of the bypassing enemy force. If enemy forces were sufficiently weakened in the attack, the Soviet force may go over to the offensive.

The defense in the illustrative exercise followed along the lines of the discussion above. Portrayed by 760 targets, of which 20 percent were moving, the enemy attacked in several lines against the 4th and 6th motorized rifle companies.²¹ Soldiers of the 5th Motorized Rifle Company and engineers with explosives reinforced the 4th Motorized Rifle Company in the area of the antitank ditch, and there they destroyed the enemy that had fallen into the fire sack. The defending force hit over 70 percent of all targets and fulfilled all tactical norms with high marks.

Whether for political reasons or in response to changes in the nature of combat, the Soviet military press today demonstrates a renewed interest in defense at the tactical level. A motorized rifle or tank battalion normally defends as part of a larger unit. Standard reinforcements include a tank company to a motorized rifle battalion, a motorized rifle company to a tank battalion, and air defense, engineer and antitank elements. The two most important features of a battalion defensive area are the system of fire and engineer preparation. The system of fire incorporates all direct and



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indirect fires with the obstacle plan and emphasizes antitank fires. Engineer preparation includes the construction of individual and unit positions; barriers, minefields and obstacles; command posts; and communications trenches linking positions within, as well as between, strongpoints.

False platoon positions within and on the flanks of the battalion strongpoint, as well as alternate fighting positions for each tank and BMP within company strongpoints, afford defending Soviet units great maneuverability and, through mobility, surprise. Given sufficient time (according to Soviet estimates just 48

A motorized rifle battalion that skillfully exploits the defensive characteristics of average terrain has a survivability rate of 40 percent. By dedicating four-fifths of the manpower of the battalion to engineer tasks, with 4 to 6 hours of work the survivability rate can be increased to 62 percent.

to 72 hours), a motorized rifle or tank battalion with standard attachments can significantly enhance its survivability, even against nuclear attack.

The challenge now is twofold. We must determine the degree to which the Soviets

embrace the defense as the preeminent form of combat. Then we must examine this tactical defensive array and determine its vulnerabilities. Of particular concern should be determining when engineer preparation began and what degree of protection from weapons effects is afforded Soviet troops. Other important focuses of an attacking commander should be to discern the actual versus the false platoon strongpoint positions, the location and nature of engineer obstacles and company and battalion command observation post locations. The defeat of a Soviet defense will depend on a thorough analysis of these and other features of the motorized rifle and tank battalion defense, coupled with a skillful application of our own tactical principles and weapons systems. *MR*

NOTES

1. See, for example, G. Ionin, "Osnovy sovremennogo oboronitel'nogo boya," [Fundamentals of modern defensive battle], *Voennyy vestnik* [Military Herald], hereafter cited as *VV*, no. 3 (1988):18-21; and Yu. Morenko, V. Lebedev and V. Sadovnikov, "Na rubezhakh oborony" [On the lines of defense] *VV*, no. 4 (1988):18-29, hereafter cited as Morenko, "Na rubezhakh."

2. *Sovetskaya voyennaya entsiklopediya* [Soviet military encyclopedia], hereafter cited as *SME*, ed. N. V. Ogarkov, (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1978), vol. 5, 660-63, s.v. "Oborona"; *Motostrelkovyy (tankovyy) batal'on v boyu* [Motorized rifle (tank) battalion in combat], ed., D. A. Dragunskiy, (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1986), 184-85; and *Taktika* [Tactics], ed. V. G. Reznichenko, (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1987), 320-21.

3. Dragunskiy, *Motostrelkovyy*, 185.

4. G. Miranovich, A. Smolyanko, "Pyat' kilometrov po frontu" [Five kilometers frontage], *Krasnaya zvezda* [Red Star] (20 August 1989):1.

5. Dragunskiy, *Motostrelkovyy*, 186.

6. *Taktika* (1987), 334.

7. *Ibid.*, 333.

8. *Ibid.*, 333-34. Dragunskiy, *Motostrelkovyy*, 189, specifies these same missions, with the exception of the anti-airborne and airmobile missions.

9. The 1984 version of *Taktika*, on page 185, states this directly. In 1986 Dragunskiy, *Motostrelkovyy*, 191, implies multiple companies in the first echelon and a single company in the second echelon.

10. *Taktika* (1987), 334.

11. Normal attachments to a battalion vary, of course, but generally include a tank company to a motorized rifle battalion; a motorized rifle company to a tank battalion; artillery, air defense and engineer units; and frequently additional combat or combat support assets from the regiment. For a detailed study of this issue, see Lester W. Grau, "The Soviet Combined Arms Battalion—Reorganization for Tactical Flexibility," (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Soviet Army

Studies Office, 1989).

12. For a dictionary definition, see *SME*, 7.360, s.v. "Sistema ognya" [System of fire]. Morenko, *Na rubezhakh*, has a practical definition on page 19. Dragunskiy, *Motostrelkovyy*, discusses system of fire beginning on page 190. *Taktika* (1987), has a section on system of fire beginning on page 346.

13. Morenko, *Na rubezhakh*, 19-24.

14. The indirect fire aspects of the system of fire are discussed in a separate section of the article, titled "Glazami artillerista" [Through the eyes of an artilleryman].

15. Dragunskiy, *Motostrelkovyy*, discusses engineer preparation of the defense beginning on page 192. *Taktika* (1987), Reznichenko begins his discussion of engineer support to the defense on page 337.

16. The Russian term for such an exercise is *pokaznoye takticheskoye zanyatiye* [demonstration tactical exercise]. Its purpose is to portray the most preferred method of organization and conduct of a given tactical maneuver, in this case the prepared defense. The engineer aspects of this exercise are discussed in a section titled "V interesakh taktiki" [In the interests of tactics], which begins on page 26 (Morenko, *Na rubezhakh*).

17. *Ibid.*, 28.

18. Dragunskiy, *Motostrelkovyy*, discusses this sequence of actions beginning on page 195; and Reznichenko, *Taktika* (1987), 351.

19. The Russian word for this process is *rekognostirovka*, [commander's reconnaissance].

20. The details of the battalion commander's oral decision are contained in Dragunskiy, *Motostrelkovyy*, beginning on page 201, and in *Taktika* (1987), beginning on page 360.

21. The live-fire portion of the demonstration exercise is described briefly in Morenko, *Na rubezhakh*, 23-24.

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